Professor D D Kosambi – Some Reminiscences

It is with distinct pleasure that I recall my very pleasant informal and peripheral association with Prof. D D Kosambi for a period of 14 years from 1948 to 1962. This came about in a rather unusual way. I had applied in the summer of 1948 for admission to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research as a research student. In the application form, in answer to the query about my research interests, I had written Theoretical/Experimental physics. I was called for an interview on the 6th of August. First I was interviewed by the experimental committee, with Bhabha as the Chairman. I was called for a second time the same day and this time the committee consisted of Dr Bhabha, Prof. Kosambi and Prof. Levy. Dr Bhabha told them that he had already examined my knowledge of physics and asked them to question me in mathematics. Prof. Levy asked me some questions about matrices and then Prof. Kosambi asked some question in statistics. He also asked me whether I know the Iyengars in the Mathematics department of Central College. A little later, I was called for a third time to Dr Bhabha's room. As I entered, Dr Bhabha said "Sreekantan, we have decided to admit you. Tell us whether you want to do theory or experimental research". I replied "Sir, you have interviewed me. I go by your advice". Dr Bhabha said "young man, if you join experimental group then perhaps you may also be able to do theoretical work. The other way is doubtful. Moreover, you have some experience in electronics which very few have in this country. If I were you, I will choose to do experimental work". I joined the Cosmic Ray group of the Institute on the 12th August 1948.

A few weeks later, Dr Bhabha called me and said that I will be working on the Cosmic Ray Mu-meson Decay problem. I should read up all the necessary literature and present a colloquium on the subject in about six weeks time. On the day of my first colloquium, I was surprised and shocked to find that right in front row of the small lecture hall were sitting Dr Bhabha, Prof. Kosambi, Prof. Levy and Prof. Masani. Behind them experimentalists A S Rao, Sahian, Thattar and others. There were no facilities for slide projector or for overhead projector system. Everything had to be written on the black board with chalk piece.

I had drawn on the black board, some of the experimental arrangements that had been adopted by others for the study of meson decay and started explaining them one by one. Dr Bhabha interrupted me, came to the black board and suggested what modifications should be made in our experimental arrangements for the experiment. Immediately after that Prof. Kosambi came to the black board and suggested some more changes. Then there ensured a discussion on the pros and cons of the modified arrangements. The net result was that my colloquium which was to be for one hour stretched to three successive Wednesday colloquia, at the end of which, I knew what exactly was the ideal experimental set-up, what precautions I had to take and what kind of statistics I had to gather and how I should go about the analysis – enough work for two years to follow.

Towards the end of 1948, Dr Bhabha invited us for a Tea Party at his Malabar Hills house next to the Hanging Gardens and overlooking the Arabian Sea. The party was to felicitate Prof. Kosambi who had been invited by the Harvard University as a Visiting Professor.

In September 1949, the new premises of TIFR at Appollo Pier, near Gateway of India became ready and we moved there. The Yacht club building had a large Dance Hall in the first floor which was converted to the Library, Laboratory for Cosmic Ray Research by the High Altitude Studies group and at one end two special air conditioned rooms were made; one for Prof. Kosambi and the other for Prof. Bernard Peters who had joined TIFR. Our Cloud Chamber laboratory was in the ground floor. Prof. Kosambi used to come to our laboratories frequently for two different reasons. One was that he was a great consumer of chacolates which he used to get from abroad and these had to be stored in an air conditioned room. Since our cloud chamber rooms had to have twenty four hour air conditioning, he used to store his stock in one of these rooms. The second reason was that Dr Kosambi had a great interest in photography. He had a Cannon Reflex Camera with which he used to take photographs. Occasionally he would give it to me to take photographs. We had all the facilities in the cloud chamber section for developing films and also do enlargements of prints. He also had expertise in Sepia toning of the prints.

After moving to Yacht Club, Prof. Kosambi gave a course of lectures on statistical treatment of data. In fact in my very first paper from TIFR, on the 'Life time of mu-meson' I have thanked Prof. Kosambi for helping me with the statistical analysis of the data.

In 1954, after my PhD thesis, Dr Bhabha deputed me to MIT, Cambridge, to work with Prof. Bruno Rossi for a year or so. When I went to tell Prof. Kosambi about this, he said that it is a good idea to have post doctoral research experience abroad and told me that his sisters' son Arun Prasad was studying at MIT in the Aeronautics Department. He would give me a small packet which I should give it to Arun which I gladly did after going there. I did not meet Arun again for a long time. I was happy to see him in the lecture hall at NIAS, after 56 years when Prof. Kosambi's daughter Prof. Meera Kosambi gave a lecture in November 2010.

Prof. Kosambi lived in Poona and used to come to Bombay everyday by Deccan Queen which during those days would have only first and second class carriages and some were reserved for season- ticket holders. It used to be said that one particular window seat in the train was always reserved for Prof. Kosambi. He was a voracious reader of fiction. He would buy new books, read them on the train and give them away to our small library in the lounge next to the dinning hall at Yacht Club.

In 1962, we moved to the new building of TIFR at Navy Nagar. Prof. Kosambi moved away from TIFR. I did not have the fortune of meeting him after this.

B V Sreekantan, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore 560 012, India.
Email: bvs@nias.iisc.ernet.in